



STATE OF WASHINGTON

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February 20, 2004

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Executive Director

Principal Randy Phillips
Brewster High School
503 South 7th Street
Brewster, WA 98812

Dear Principal Phillips:

We write to you to follow up on our discussion in January regarding the meeting you held with Latino students about gang violence at Brewster High. Our responsibility under state law is to advise state and local agencies on issues of importance to the Latino community. Several parents and community advocates contacted us expressing concerns about the tenor of this meeting. We have met with parents, community advocates, and school representatives to gather information regarding this meeting. We write to you to express our concern regarding some of the issues arising out of the aforementioned meeting, but at the same time we write to you offering our assistance in helping to address some of the problems raised by that meeting.

Our main advice to the administration at Brewster High is that gang violence is a school-wide issue, not a Latino student issue. In our conversation, you mentioned that you had been seeing a surge in gang activity and violence in the weeks preceding the altercation in November, which led to the closed-door meeting with the 27 Latino students. Addressing a growing school violence problem must take the involvement and commitment of all students and all staff, not just a segment of students. As you mentioned, some of the students in this meeting did not have a gang affiliation or previous problems with gang activity. The selection of the students for this meeting can easily be read as a targeting of a specific segment of students. We understand that this was not your intention. However, as we at the Commission have seen in so many varied examples, perception often outweighs intention. So long as parents and students believe that Latino students were targeted for this message, good intentions will not

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suffice. By taking the message to the whole school that gang violence and activity must stop, it will be clear that you in no way intend to state that Latino students are more predisposed to be involved in gangs, and that the problem is confined to them.

For children who have been identified with gang paraphernalia, or who have been observed in taking part in gang activities or violence, we agree that immediate intervention and discipline is important. Parents must be brought into these individualized discussions. Without parental involvement, any efforts to curb gang violence will not succeed. 45% of students in the Brewster School District are English Language Learners. It is safe to assume that an even greater percentage of parents are monolingual Spanish speakers. This means that Brewster High must address the language barrier faced by parents who seek to participate in their children's education. We advise that the school undertake a comprehensive, long term effort to involve monolingual Spanish speaking parents into the educational experience of their children.

In our discussion, we reviewed some of the charts you presented at the meeting with the 27 students that addressed low performance in the WASL by Latino students. While we understand your intention, the message received by the students at the meeting was that Latinos were not as capable at excelling at the WASL compared to non-Hispanic white students. We know that you are of the same mind as the Commission in that such an assertion is baseless. Latino students have the same capacity, drive, and fervor about their education as non-Latinos. We are concerned that a different message is reaching the students of Brewster High, not only due to the statements made at the meeting, but due to reports by students of insensitive statements by teachers who were expressing their opinion about the validity of the November meeting. We recommend that all teachers as well as the administration train on cultural competence techniques so that students do not receive the same hurtful and divisive message in the future. There are many resources to draw from on issues of cultural competency in North Central Washington: we recommend contacting Jorge Chacon, Dora Treviño, or Jim Tiffany, all of whom live in Wenatchee and all of whom have strong experience in addressing issues of cultural competency within communities.

Finally, we suggest that you process the response to the November meeting as an experience from which to learn. Active and determined parents have stepped forward to complain about the meeting. Work together with these parents to develop a strategy to address gang violence, to boost WASL scores, and to ease any racial or ethnic tensions. These are the advocates that would have helped you avoid the problems with the November meeting had you met with them

beforehand. Meet with them, discuss issues openly, ask for advice. They want what you want: for the students of Brewster High School to succeed.

We hope this letter has been helpful to you. Do not hesitate to contact us if you need more information, or if you need to discuss this letter further.

Sincerely,

Antonio M. Ginatta
Executive Director